

CongressDaily, March 13, 2008

The State Department has given the green light for FDA to station eight hires in China amid ongoing tensions with the country over tainted imported food. Undersecretary of State for Management Patrick Kennedy confirmed the approval Wednesday in a letter to Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Ill. The State Department's approval opens office space at the U.S. embassy in Beijing and consulates in Shanghai and Guangzhou. "These positions will respond to the urgent challenge of food, drug, and medical device safety issues between the U.S. and China," Kennedy's letter states. Kirk led a visit to China last year with Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Wash., leaders of the House U.S.-China Working Group. Kirk pushed Kennedy during a Feb. 28 State-Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee hearing to approve the work space.

Problems with China escalated about a year ago when contaminated pet food sickened and killed animals and was followed by an import alert on certain Chinese fish that were contaminated with antibiotics. Most recently, a Chinese pharmaceutical ingredient maker was linked to a tainted blood thinner that has sickened hundreds and killed up to 19 people. FDA has said it will put employees in China to monitor companies that want to export food, drugs or medical devices to the United States. The agency did not respond to inquiries on the State Department announcement.

Kirk's next target for China is to place Consumer Product Safety Commission employees there and keep an eye on foreign manufacturers of consumer goods. Millions of lead paint-laced toys made in China have been recalled since the summer when popular Thomas the Tank Engine toys were recalled for that problem. Consumer Product Safety Commission Acting Chairwoman Nancy Nord said this week at a House Financial Services Appropriations Subcommittee hearing staff would begin examining the possibility of stationing employees in China as early as the spring.